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Russian Migrants in Tbilisi: The New White Russians?

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Abstract

Following the February 24, 2022 invasion of Ukraine by the Russian military, an estimated 100,000 Russians fled their own country to take refuge in Georgia. The arrival of Russians in large numbers, however, did not go unnoticed by many in Georgia, 20% of which continues to be occupied by the Russian military. These events prompt the following questions: Why did Russians choose to flee their country, and what have their lives been like in Georgia? To answer these questions, this paper draws on 16 in-depth interviews with Russian migrants conducted in the summers of 2022, 2023, and 2024. The paper uses the *aspirations-capabilities* model of migration to interpret the decision to migrate, and develops the distinction between negative and positive intrinsic aspirations to migrate. The paper also builds upon descriptions of the Russian migrants and the White Russians with an analytical comparison of the different waves in terms of the *aspirations-capabilities* model. The paper finds that the Russian migrants find themselves between an at times hostile Georgian public and a regime in Georgia that also may not view the migrants favorably.

Keywords

Russia, Georgia, migrants, Russo-Ukrainian war, aspirations-capabilities model of migration

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Introduction

The February 24, 2022 invasion of Ukraine by Russia captured headlines with images of apartment buildings hit by missiles, armored vehicles demolished by munitions, and civilian casualties. Along with the destruction inflicted on Ukraine, a wave of migrants from Russia numbering in the hundreds of thousands crossed the border of Russia and arrived in nearby countries. In countries such as the United States, it is not uncommon to hear of people threatening to move to another country, perhaps Canada, in protest of an unwelcome political result. In the case of the Russian invasion of Ukraine, these Russians followed through on their principles and left.

This paper seeks to answer the question of why these Russians chose to leave, and what their lives have been like in their new existence abroad. The paper draws upon the *aspirations-capabilities model of migration* to explain the decision to migrate to Georgia (De Haas, 2021). As described further below, the migrants consist to a great extent of younger professionals, many of whom work remotely in the informational technology sector. The relatively affluent socioeconomic status of the migrants provided them with the *capability* to emigrate from Russia. The paper draws upon the interviews conducted in the field work to describe the *instrumental* and *intrinsic aspirations* that informed the decision to migrate to Georgia. The paper develops the distinction between *negative and positive intrinsic aspirations* to describe the Russian motivations to move to Georgia. The paper also engages with the debate over which migration typology best applies to the Russian migrants. The paper considers multiple categorizations, including refugee and *relokanty*, and applies the typology of migrants as employed by De Haas.

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The paper hones in on the experience of migrants in Georgia, a small, mountainous country in the South Caucasus. Georgia is an important country because it has received the second-largest number of migrants, next to Kazakhstan, and also has a tense relationship with Russia due to the long history of imperial rule from Russia (first during the tsarist period in the 19th century and then under Soviet rule from 1921 to 1991). In over 30 years of independence, the country has fought several civil wars with ethnic groups affiliated with Russia, and even fought a short war with its northern neighbor in August of 2008. Therefore, the choice of fleeing to Georgia has important implications for the Russians in exile.

Thus, the second question is what their lives have been like since leaving. The climate in Georgia towards Russians is not altogether welcoming, although the arrival of Russians has happened to coincide with a government that is seeking to create warmer relations with the Russian government. The Georgian government has been reluctant to crack down and limit the arrival of Russians, while also taking advantage of economic opportunities created by sanctions on the Russian government. Even if the Georgian public has been at times less hospitable to the Russian migrants, the government itself is loath to act on those sentiments.

To provide historical context to the current wave of Russian migrants, the paper includes a comparison with the White Russians who fled in large numbers between 1917 and 1922 in the context of the Bolshevik Revolution and subsequent civil war. Russian commentators in popular media have noted the similarities between the two waves of migrants, as described by Prashizky (2024). Previous research has examined how Russian public intellectuals who fled following the 2022 invasion compared themselves to the White Russians (ibid). This paper builds on this research by drawing attention to the similarities and differences between the lived experiences of everyday Russian migrants in both waves of migration in terms of the aspirations-capabilities model.

To answer these questions, we draw on 16 in-depth interviews conducted in Tbilisi, the capital of Georgia, in June 2022, June–July 2023, and May of 2024. The interviews, averaging an hour in length, included a total of 21 Russians who had migrated to Georgia. The questions for Russian migrants focused on their motivations for leaving and the quality of their lives in Georgia. Further details on the methodology, the interviews, and the questions asked can be found in the appendix.

The capital of Tbilisi was chosen as the main location for the interviews because the highest concentration of Russian migrants was located there. Tbilisi, as the capital of Georgia, is also the main urban area for the country, with a population of some 1.25 million out of a total population of around 3.7 million. Yet as the urban capital of Georgia, the findings are not generalizable to Georgia as a whole. Indeed, other population centers for Russian migrants include Kutaisi and Batumi, and the findings here cannot be generalized to those areas. Yet because of the substantial Russian population in Tbilisi, the authors decided to focus on that particular location.

The paper proceeds in six sections. The first outlines the relations between Georgia and Russia, pointing out that despite the low point of Georgian-Russian relations in the August war of 2008, the relationship has warmed under the party currently in power, Georgian Dream. The second section summarizes sociological findings about the socio-economic and demographic characteristics of the Russian migrants. Sections three and four draw on 16 interviews conducted in Tbilisi in the summers of 2022, 2023, and 2024 to understand why the Russians choose to flee to Georgia and to describe their life in Georgia. The fifth section builds on the findings of the previous two sections by comparing the new Russian diaspora to the largest Russian diasporas in recent history, the "White Russians" of the 1920s. The new Russian diaspora is similar in many ways to the White Russians, as they are voluntarily choosing to flee out of fear of the current regime and ideological disagreements with it. A conclusion section follows with considerations of future research in this area.

Overview of Russia–Georgia Relations Since 1991

Georgia and Russia have a long and complicated history. Contemporary relations between Russia and Georgia date from the independence of both countries after the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991. Under the first two leaders of Georgia, relations with Russia ran from hostility to pragmatic acceptance of its northern neighbor (Jones, 2015, 249). Following Mikhail Saakashvili's ascendance into the presidency in 2004, relations with Russia began to deteriorate. Part of the reason for the deterioration in relations stemmed from the determination of Saakashvili for Georgia to join NATO (Toal, 2017, 281). Another factor was Saakashivili's decision to re-incorporate the separatist regions of Abkhazia and South Ossetia into the territory of Georgia (MacFarlane, 2020, 197-8). Relations reached their nadir in August 2008 when Russia invaded Georgia in response to a military incursion by the Georgian military to capture South Ossetia (Asmus, 2010). Russian forces remain deployed in the separatist regions after the war ended, such that 20% of the country is occupied by a foreign power. Relations with Russia stabilized after the 2008 war, although Saakashvili continued to use anti-Russian rhetoric and attempted to ingratiate himself with Western leaders (Kavadze, 2020, 79-80).

Relations with Russia took another turn with the victory of the Georgian Dream party in the 2012 parliamentary elections. Formally led by billionaire Bidzina Ivanishvili, the party took the country in a more "pragmatic" direction in

its relations with Russia (Kavadze, 2020, 92). Georgian Dream has pursued cooperation in economic activities, even if the space for political cooperation has been limited (Kakachia et al., 2018). The relationship has been hampered by Georgian requirements that Russia recognize Abkhazia and South Ossetia as part of Georgia, while Russian has been willing to use economic sanctions on goods like mineral water and wine when Georgia's behavior is thought to be unacceptable (Lomia, 2020).

Georgian Dream's pragmatism is perhaps best illustrated by its response to the 24 February 2022 invasion of Ukraine by Russia. Georgian Dream refused to participate in the sanctions that most other European countries placed on Russia. Prime Minister Irakli Garibashvili on February 25, 2022 stated that, "considering our national interests and interests of the People, Georgia does not plan to participate in the financial and economic sanctions, as this would only damage our country and populace more," (Kucera, 2022a). However, the government of Georgia later agreed to participate in the financial sanctions, limiting the ability of a Georgian branch of the Russian bank VTB to operate (TASSa, 2022).

The reluctance to support Ukraine extended to limits on material assistance. Georgian Dream refused to provide military assistance to Ukraine, despite requests from the beleaguered country for such equipment (TASSb, 2022). The government also blocked a plane of Georgian volunteers who sought to travel and support Ukraine in its defense (Georgia Today, 2022). The government of Ukraine rescinded their ambassador to Georgia as a result, although Georgia fighters were later able to reach Ukraine and the ambassador quietly resumed his duties later in March of 2022 (Agende.de 2022).

Georgian Dream claims that their neutrality in the Ukrainian war is in the security interests of Georgia. Essentially, they argue that they are keeping the country from war with Russia. Georgian Dream party Chairman Irakli Kobakhidze believes that "there are serious forces that we call the 'global war party' … that are interested in involving Georgia in the war and are trying to do it in various forms and methods" (Echo of the Caucasus, 2023). Calls for increased Georgian support for Ukraine were dismissed as stemming from a "Ukrainization plan" by a "fifth column" that seeks to open a "second front" against Russia in Georgia (JAM News, 2023).

The government has even resumed flights to Moscow. Flights had been halted by the Russian government since 2019, when public protests broke out in response to a Russian parliamentarian sitting in a chair reserved for the Georgian Head of Parliament during a session of the Interparliamentary Assembly on Orthodoxy (Higgins, 2019). This reconsideration by the Georgian government led to a strong response by Andriy Kasianov, the Ukrainian Charge d'Affaires in Georgia, who called for a possible evacuation of Ukranians from Georgia if flights were resumed (Georgia Today, 2023). In May 2023, Russia decided to resume flights to Georgia, despite the fact that Russian airlines are sanctioned internationally and in spite of domestic resistance.

Economic factors are another part of Georgian Dream's reasoning over neutrality (Menabde, 2023). 1.5 million Russians have fled to their country in response to the invasion of Ukraine, and several hundred thousand have either transited through or seek to settle in Georgia (Bolkvadze, 2023). Bringing their economic resources with them, the influx of people has contributed to Georgia having one of the highest rates of economic growth in 2022, seeing 10% economic growth year over year (Cordell, 2022).

Booming trade relations with Russia have contributed to the high growth rate over the past year. Russian imports are up 74% in 2022 over the previous year, as sanctions from Western countries created weak demand for Russian goods and Georgian companies are taking advantage of lower prices (Dezan Shira & Associates, 2022). Georgian exports were similarly up nearly 32% in 2022, due to strong demand from both China and Russia (Dezan Shira & Associates, 2023). This behavior is consistent with previous evaluations of Georgian Dream's political objectives, which sought to depoliticize economic issues and renew economic ties with Russia (Harney, 2018).

The attitude of a considerable portion of the Georgian public towards the war in Ukraine is quite different from Georgian Dream. Protests against the Russian invasion were held in front of the parliament building on Shota Rustaveli avenue beginning on 24 February, and continued every night for the next 2 weeks (Beard, 2022). Surveys have found that a large majority of Georgians, as high as 87%, feel that Ukraine's war with Russia is also theirs (ibid).

The tension between the attitudes of the government and the public in regards to Ukraine intersects, if not collides, over the large numbers of Russian migrants who have arrived in Georgia following the onset of the war in Ukraine. Roughly 50,000 Russians entered Georgia through the Verkhny Lars border crossing in the initial days of the war alone, although some 35,000 left Georgia in the weeks after. In September of 2022, following the announcement of a mobilization drive in Russia, over 220,000 Russians entered Georgia (JAM News, 2022). Yet only a fraction of these individuals continued to reside in Georgia. According to Georgian Member of Parliament Levan Karumidze (2022), some 52,000 Russians were residing in Georgia after exits were taken into account between January and September 2022. Similarly, only 1,598 individuals granted Georgian citizenship in the first 7 months of 2022, of which 723 were Russian (JAM News, 2022). The Russian migrants are entering into Georgia at a volatile moment in the country's politics.

Who Are the Russian Migrants?

Several studies have attempted to establish the demographic and economic characteristics of the Russian migrants to Georgia. The majority of migrants to Georgia have tended to be male (60.30%) rather than female (39.70%), and tend to be younger (averaging 32 years old) (Krawatzek et al., 2023). The vast majority of Russian migrants are estimated to reside in the capital city, Tbilisi (81.4%). The migrants tend to be well-educated, with over 70% having completed higher education (Krawatzek et al., 2023). The migrants tend to come from St. Petersburg and Moscow, the two largest urban centers in Russia.

The most common occupation for the migrants is in information technology: one study estimated that 27% of Russian migrants in Georgia work in IT, while another found that half of the migrants had employment in the IT sector (Krawatzek et al., 2023; Kuleshova et al., 2023). Because they predominantly work in the IT sector, the Russian migrants are found to typically have middle-class salaries and lifestyles that are distinct from the lifestyles of most Georgians, who typically earn smaller salaries than the migrants (Kuleshova et al., 2023).

There is a debate in the literature over how to categorize the Russian migrants. Krawatzek et al. (2023) argue that the migrants are not refugees, as they are not fleeing a warzone and relatively few have had direct experience with political persecution. Their migration was not forced in the sense that they were physically incapable of continuing to reside in Russia. Instead, they suggest that the Russian migrants constitute a particular kind of voluntary migration, a "lifestyle migration" akin to digital nomads that are able to maintain a particular kind of lifestyle while living abroad (Benson & O'Reilly, 2016).

Prashizky (2023) suggests that the migrants were indeed "forced" due to the "involuntary nature of the current wave of Russian migration." For this reason, Prashizky characterizes the migrants as "refugees due to their opposition to the war and rejection of taking up arms, hence escape from mobilization" (2023, 4). She further distinguishes the refugees as temporary ("Odyssean") due to their openness to eventually returning to Russia, as opposed to permanent ("Rubicon") refugees who have lost the ability to return (2023, 4).

Many of the Russians who have migrated, however, appear to prefer the term *relokanty* to the terms migrant or refugee. It is precisely because the Russians who migrated "find it difficult to accept their new status" that they "prefer the term 'relokanty' to 'migrants', 'emigrants', or 'refugees'" (Kostenko et al., 2023). However, "relokanty" has particular connotations that impact its usefulness. Sahadeo explains that

> Russians use the term "relokanty" – derived from "relokatsiia" [relocation] employed in Russian to signal the movement of enterprises – to distinguish themselves as a category of human mobility, much in the way Westerners employ "expatriates." "Relokanty" allows Russians to differ themselves from Georgians, Armenians, Kazakhs and Kyrgyz who come to Russia and are labelled "migranty" or "gastarbeitery" [guest workers], terms with racialized connotations. [2024, 85n1]

Other scholars have adopted the terms "exiles" and "exile communities" to describe the Russian migrants, to highlight the tendency for the Russian migrants to form exclusive social communities that fail to assimilate into their host societies (Gavrilova, 2025).

While acknowledging the debate on the proper categorization of the migrants, this paper employs the terminology introduced by de Haas. He differentiates "distress migrants," or individuals lacking a "reasonable option to stay … [and] fleeing life-threatening conditions but possessing the means to move abroad," and "free migrants," or individuals with "relatively unconstrained mobility in and between wealthy countries" (2021, 27). While the Russian migrants were not strictly compelled to leave, their decision was made under a perception of duress, and therefore can be considered a hybrid between de Haas's categories of distress migrants and free migrants.

In terms of the *aspirations-capability* model, what this discussion illustrates is that the people who chose to migrate to Georgia had a socioeconomic status that provided them the *capability* to emigrate from Russia. De Haas points out that "economic growth and improvements in living standards are likely to increase people's migration capabilities by increasing their ability to assume the costs and risks of migrating" (2021, 20). While their socioeconomic status provided the foundation to migrate, the fact that Russians migrated in large numbers and in large part to a particular urban area allowed them to take advantage of social networks to reestablish their livelihoods in a new environment.

Why They Chose Georgia

As described above, several hundred thousand Russians entered Georgia in the months following the invasion of Ukraine. One simple reason as to why they chose to enter Georgia is proximity. The country shares a border with Russia, although the only border crossing that is currently open is at Verkhny Lars on the Georgian Military Highway. The other border crossings are located in the regions of Abkhazia and South Ossetia, which are occupied by Russian forces that prevent transit through them from Russia to the rest of Georgia. Furthermore, even though direct flights to Georgia from Russia had not been possible between 2019 and March 2023, Georgia shares borders with Armenia and Turkey, which do allow flights from Russia. Individuals can avoid the long overland commute through Russia to the Georgian border, and instead can fly to Armenia or Turkey and then cross into Georgia by land. Richard Pipes's

observation that Georgia, and the Caucasus in general, "have offered a natural haven for peoples seeking escape from wars and invasions" still holds true today (1964, 16).

Along with geographic proximity, Georgia has long been seen as a holiday destination for Russians. While it was part of the USSR, Georgia was promoted as the "Soviet Florida" for its sub-tropical climate, beaches, and rich food and wine culture (De Waal, 2019, 81). Russians had the impression of Georgia, and the Caucasus region as a whole, as "an unthreatening, exotic area of their common Soviet state, a holiday destination or a repository of quaint traditions" (ibid, 93). These impressions of the region persist. One Georgian interviewee explains how in the "Soviet Union, Georgia was considered like a kind of Soviet Italy--These southern people who are good cooks .... I think this image still prevails in Russia."[1] One Russian interviewee echoed these sentiments, explaining how "I can't say that Georgia and Tbilisi is the place of my dream to live. And after Moscow…Moscow never sleeps, you know? …[B]ut also it's good. Georgian people are so friendly, food is so delicious, the city is beautiful, [with] mountains around."[2]

The visa regime in Georgia is also hospitable to Russians. Georgia suspended the need for visas for visitors from Russia in 2012 in order to boost tourism. Russians are able to work in the country as well. Other European countries are much less hospitable, and require having a job first in order to receive a visa. The only stipulation is that Russians need to leave and re-enter Georgia within 12 months, at which point the 12 month-visa resets. One interview explained how he and his partner had "some discussion about the choice of the country we were leaving to, but Georgia won because of obvious reasons…. You can basically stay here infinitely as long as you cross the border every year."[3]

The stated reasons for leaving Russia reflect a mixture of ideological and material reasons. Some of the interviewees claimed to be part of the political opposition in Russia, and feared that the climate of tolerance for political opposition had virtually disappeared. One interviewee claimed that he had participated in protests in Russia in the past 2 years, but decided to migrate because the situation in Russia had become "really scary."[4] Several of the interviewees claimed to be supporters of opposition politician Alexei Navalny, and claimed that repression from the security apparatus in Russia caused them to flee.[5] Others didn't want to pay taxes to a regime that was fighting a war they didn't support, which they felt would make them complicit in it.

One factor that many of the respondents mentioned was guilt. One respondent explained how he found himself feeling ashamed because of what was happening in Ukraine, even though he himself didn't approve of his government or have any control over it.[6] Yet other respondents expressed exasperation about having to continually apologize for the Russian government. One respondent explained how a taxi cab driver in Georgia berated her with his opinions about Russians and the Russian government. "I don't need to tolerate that," she explained. "Like, I don't need to understand every single driver that talks shit about Russians to me, because it's actually not tolerable. Like, enough is enough, you know what I mean? Like, I'm not your personal therapist over here. I'm just giving you money to drive me from point A to point B."[7]

Whether due to guilt or another motivation, Russian migrants to Georgia have established several non-profits to assist Ukrainians. One respondent from a Russian non-profit explained that "so in the first place there was this shame of being Russian, of speaking Russian….And this is partially why we decided to do it [ie establish the non-profit] in the first place, not to just, you know, run away from it [ie the Russian invasion of Ukraine], I guess."[8]

The likelihood of returning to Russia was low, even if the war ended, because of their attitudes towards the government. They didn't expect to return until there was a change of personnel in the government. As one interviewee put it, "Well, when all of these dumbasses die out, then we'll be a wonderful, beautiful country."[9] Another interviewee commented, when asked about when he would return home, that "it's really complicated, as you know…Maybe [I] hope that Putin will be overthrown or he'll die from something….It just feels like it'll take years and years…."[10] Another interviewee remarked, responding to the same question, "Well, I want to return to Russia but to another Russia…. My dream is [that] a Russian prosecutor will charge Putin, and a Russian judge will sentence him. That's my dream, but I think he'll die early."[11]

As it stands, the Russian interviewees expressed considerable anxiety for the future. One interviewee shared that "we don't know what tomorrow is going to be like. Being a Russian person, you really don't know. Like, I am not trying to be dramatic or anything, it's the honest truth. That's how I feel, and a lot of my friends feel this way too."[12] Making plans is difficult. "So I don't know. Maybe in one or 2 years I will try to move to Spain or Portugal, but now I think that [for] 1 year or 2 years I will be here…. So now, without a plan, I don't know what will be in a month."[13]

In terms of the *aspirations-capability* model, the findings from the interviews illustrate both the *intrinsic* and *instrumental* aspirations that informed the decision to migrate. De Haas defines intrinsic aspirations for migration as the "value which people may attach to the migration experience in and of itself," and associates the term with "wanderlust, curiosity and an innate desire to break free and discover new horizons" (2021, 18 and 15). However, the interviews suggested a negative intrinsic aspiration to migrate, such as seeking to overcome the sense of guilt of living in a country that was invading a neighbor or the desire not to pay taxes to such a state. The decision to migrate was not one of seeking adventure, but due to a perceived inability to continue to live in their own country.

The interviews also revealed instrumental aspirations for migrating to Georgia. De Haas describes instrumental

aspirations as "a 'functional' or 'utilitarian' means to achieve another end, such as a higher income, higher social status, better health care, better education or, in the case of refugees, protection from persecution and violence" (2021, 18). The desire to not be conscripted to fight in a war that one does not believe in is an example of an instrumental reason to migrate, as is the desire to avoid raising a child in a country actively invading its neighbor.

Yet the uncertainty about their future and their status in the country leaves open the question of how long they will continue to reside in Georgia. The next section turns to how they have experienced life in Georgia, which will have important implications for their decision to stay in Georgia or move on to a third country.

Experiences of Russian Migrants in Tbilisi

The reception of the Russian migrants by Georgian society has been mixed, with some respondents reporting an overall friendly welcome and others reporting hostile attitudes. Some, of course, reported both. One interviewee explained how "the Georgian people are really warm…and they are very welcoming under the circumstances. I feel like there are amazing, amazing Georgians [who] understand us and that they feel for us….Overall, it's a beautiful, wonderful country and the people in it are extremely loving."[14]

Yet the response by Georgian society has not been entirely welcoming. Some businesses in the capital Tbilisi have put in place online "visa forms" that Russians are expected to sign, which asks for Russians to declare their opposition to President Vladimir Putin, among other things (Parulava, 2022). Similarly, the Bank of Georgia, one of the largest banking institutions in the country, has required Russian customers to sign a "loyalty form" (Kucera, 2022b).

Some businesses post signs saying that the Russian language is not welcome and displaying their opposition to President Vladimir Putin (Image 1). Image 1 also shows stickers and flyers proclaiming "Putin Khuylo," which translates into English as "Putin is an Asshole." Other businesses display signs offering free drinks on the occasion of Putin's demise (Image 2). Street graffiti proclaiming slogans such as "Stop Putin," "Fuck Putin," and "Fuck Russia" are common in the streets of Tbilisi (Cocks, 2022).

Even if the signage in Tbilisi can be unwelcoming, not every Russian migrant mentioned experiencing hostility at an interpersonal level. Many insisted that Georgia and Georgians are fundamentally hospitable. When they did report interpersonal hostility, the interactions seemed to break down along gender lines. The male respondents did not report having hostile interactions with Georgians, while several of the female respondents did. One female respondent reported that Georgian men had sexist attitudes towards Russian women.[15]

Nevertheless, these issues have led to demands to ban Russians from entering Georgia. For example, one online

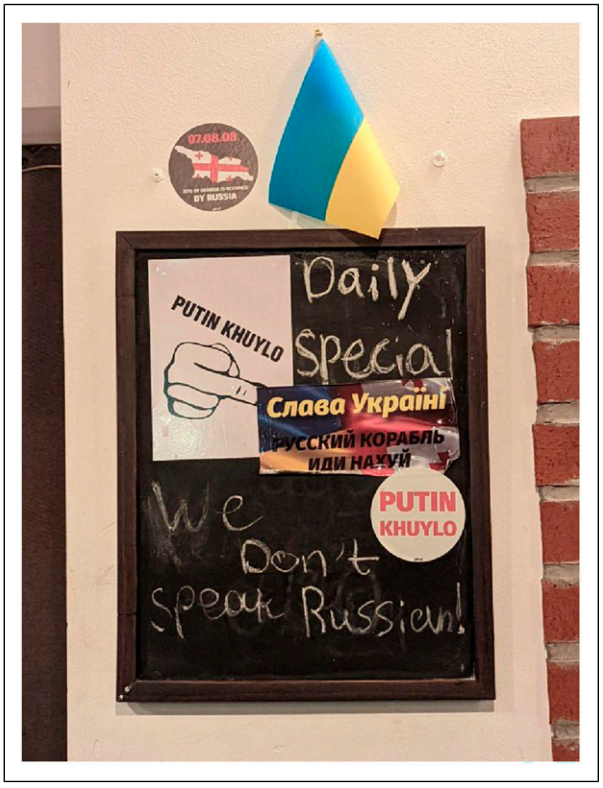

Image 1. Photo Taken by Josiah Marineau, June 25, 2022, Tbilisi, Georgia

petition entitled "Strategy Aghmashenebeli" calls for a ban on Russians from entering, "taking into account the examples of other countries like Lithuania, Latvia, and Estonia." The petition cites the "new concept of Russia's humanitarian policy abroad," passed by Putin on September 6, 2022, as reasons for concern regarding the influx. The petition claims that protecting Russians abroad was used to justify the 2008 war in Georgia, as well as the 2014 and 2022 attacks on Ukraine.

Efforts to limit Russian migration to Georgia also increased during the failed attempt by Evgeny Prigozhin to seize Moscow in June 2023. Rallies calling to "Close the Border" were held on the steps of parliament, suggesting that the coup attempt may lead to another influx of Russian migrants into Georgia. While the border was not closed after the coup attempt in Russia quickly dissolved, the response by members of the Georgian public suggests a level of discontent with the Russian migrants (Image 3).

So far, the government has resisted the calls for banning or limiting the number of Russian migrants. The chairman of the governing party, Georgian Dream, characterized such requests as unsuited for the "civilized world," and attributed the calls as stemming from the political opposition (Kucera, 2022b). In any case, putting restrictions on Russian migrants would run counter to the Georgian government's efforts to normalize relations with its northern neighbor.

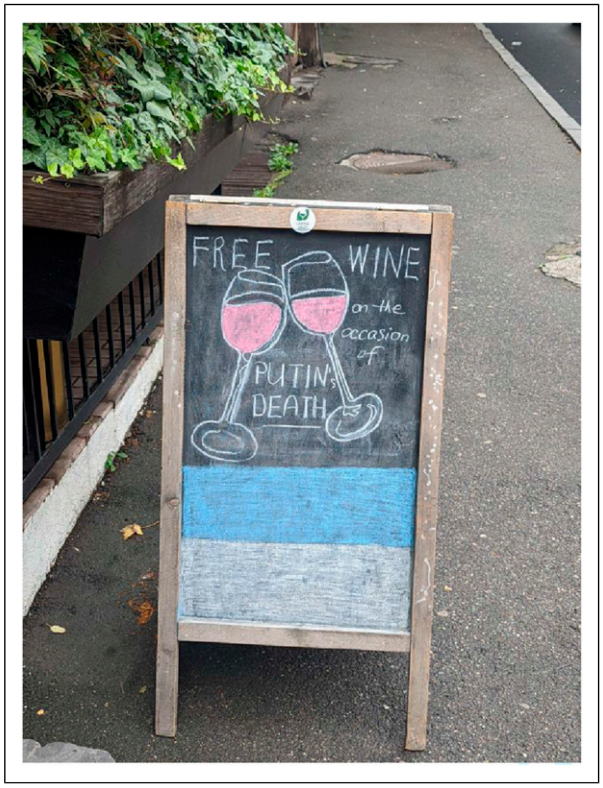

Image 2. Photo Taken by Josiah Marineau, June 26, 2022, Tbilisi, Georgia

There are other reasons why the government might tacitly welcome, or at least hesitate to resist, the arrival of a large number of Russian migrants. The population of Georgia has been decreasing since 1989 due to emigration of Georgians and low birth rates (Salukvadze & Davitashvili, 2020, 50). From a high of 5.4 million residents in 1989, the Georgian population shrank by an average of 0.9% a year for the next 25 years, reaching 3.7 million residents in 2014 (ibid., 53). The new Russian migrants might provide a much-needed boost in population to at least slow this decline. Furthermore, having a large number of Russians living in Georgia is not unprecedented. During the Soviet period, Russians made up more than 6% (roughly 340,000 people) of the population of Georgia (ibid.). While the new migrants have been numerous, there is no evidence that their numbers are as high as they were at that point.

In terms of the *aspirations-capability* model, individuals may aspire to migrate or may aspire to stay. Having aspired to migrate to Georgia, will the Russian migrants stay, or will they move on, either to a third country, or perhaps back to Russia? The interviewees suggested that returning to Russia is not a realistic option for them while the current regime is in power. Yet the political instability and the lukewarm reception of the Georgian people suggest that the *capability* of the Russian migrants to stay in Georgia may be limited.

The New White Russians?

As Kostenko et al. note, "In terms of its scale and social impact, the new wave of emigration from Russia is comparable to the 'white' emigration that occurred a century ago as people fled the Revolution and Civil War" (2023). Russians themselves have drawn attention to the parallels between the most recent wave of migration and the White Russians (Prashizky, 2024). This section draws on the findings of interviews in Tbilisi to describe the similarities and differences between the two waves of migration.

The current wave of Russian migrants to Georgia resembles in many ways an earlier wave of Russian migrants, the White Russians. Many of those fleeing Russia in this recent wave have been motivated to leave due to the fear of political persecution, similar to the White Russian refugees in the first wave of Russian immigration that fled from the Bolshevik regime nearly a century ago (Üre, 2020). The White Russians were ideologically opposed to the ruling party in Russia, so their reasons for leaving their homeland were not only politically motivated, but related to personal safety as well (Schaufuss, 1939). Many White Russians relocated to various parts of Europe, North America, South America, and Asia, with most of them never returning to Russia (Friedberg, 1968; Xia, 2021; Üre, 2020). Despite this, most White Russians chose not to assimilate into their new host societies, as many of them hoped that their exile was merely temporary, and that they would return to their homeland in the near future once the Bolshevik regime collapsed (Raeff, 1990). This notion parallels the expressed beliefs of Russian respondents in this study, in that they presumably will not return to Russia until a regime change occurs.[16]

Resembling those that oppose the current Russian regime, the White Russians that fought against the Bolshevik regime lacked a shared ideology besides their desire to remove the current political leaders of Russia (Robinson, 2002). The White Russians were politically diverse, including right-wing nationalists and left-wing socialists, which may have contributed to the vast amount of time they spent quarreling with one another (Friedberg, 1968; Robinson, 2002). This reflects the apparent lack of indicators of an ideological consensus among the Russians interviewed in this study besides their opposition to authoritarian practices.

The White Russian society abroad was composed of numerous humanitarian organizations that provided assistance to emigres, like the Union of Zemstva and Towns and the Russian Red Cross (Johnston, 1988; Robinson, 2002). Some Russian participants in this study were also members of humanitarian organizations, offering aid, like food and medicine, to Ukrainian refugees in Georgia.[17] One respondent said, "here people who don't want this war, who want to do something, who can't close eyes on this situation, and there is really some organization" and "that more than

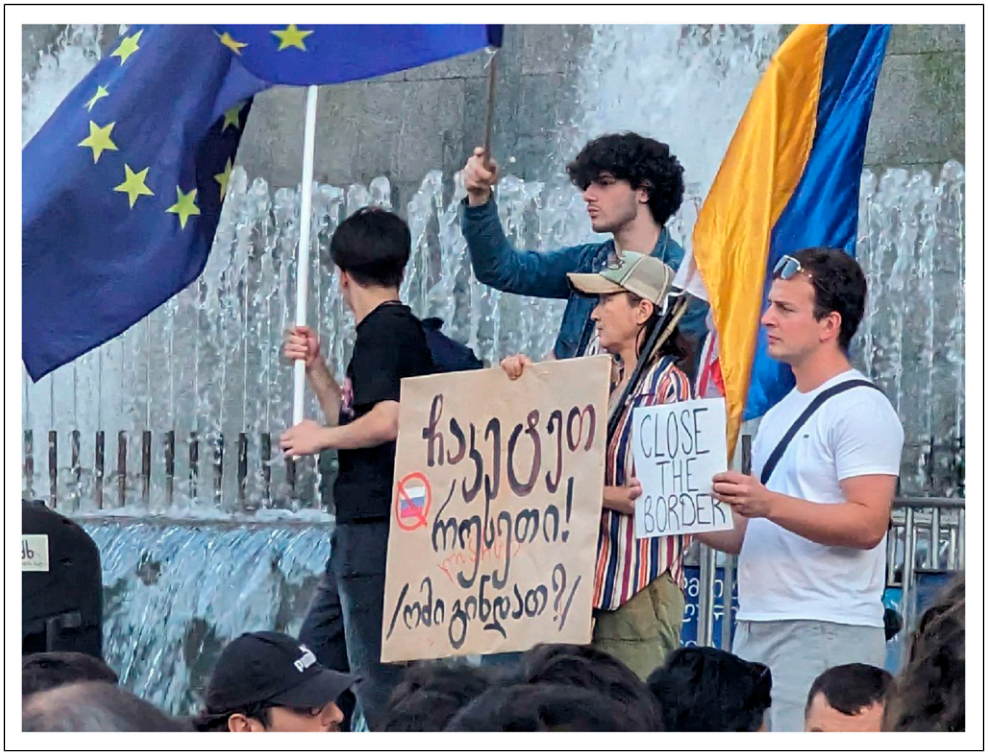

Image 3. Protest Held on the Steps of the Parliament Building on 24 June 2023. The Sign Reads "Close the Border! Do You Want War?" Photo Taken by Josiah Marineau

half our company is from Russia, people from Russia."[18] This outlines another similarity between the two waves, in that some of those that fled from armed conflict organized to support other refugees that were less fortunate.

The White Russians who fled to other countries in the first wave of immigration typically only had a limited number of employment opportunities available to them, and many of these jobs were not prestigious or well-paid (Raeff, 1990). These jobs included service positions in the restaurant industry, such as waiters and chefs, or the entertainment business, like doormen and musicians (Raeff, 1990; Xia, 2021). These employment limitations resemble the job discrimination experienced by some of the Russians interviewed, as one stated "trying to apply to European and American companies is extremely hard because, you know, they hear my English at first and they're like, oh, you're great, we love you. And then once we start talking about, like, you know, the whole formalities of documents and stuff, they find out that I'm Russian and they immediately cut me off."[19]

As mentioned above, one concern stated by Georgian respondents is the possibility that there may be FSB infiltrators and other espionage agents hidden among Russians immigrating to Georgia.[20] This concern mirrors a common stereotype that White Russians often encountered in their new host countries, as they were frequently suspected of being spies (Üre, 2020). However, this stereotype was not entirely baseless, as due to their impoverished economic conditions, some White Russians were targeted to become informants for countries that were at war (Xia, 2021). One example of this tactic includes the Japanese army utilizing financial incentives to recruit White Russians for wartime intelligence purposes against China (Xia, 2021).

The White Russians fled their homeland for an undetermined future as transient migrants, living abroad in a state of anxiety (Bernstein, 2020; Zatsepine, 2017). This parallels the current wave of those escaping from Russia, with one participant asserting "we talk about the dark, dark thoughts that we have, we talk about the constant anxiety that we get."[21] For the White Russians, Russia was thought of as a stable home where they would have been able to live out lives of happiness, so it was difficult to leave this behind (Andreyev & Savický, 2004). Some current Russians emigres claim that while some of their friends also left, some were not willing to abandon their lives of comfort. One interviewee expressed "You see on Instagram that your friend left their past life and you see Instagram stories of your friend in Moscow and it looks like nothing changed. People go to the same places, to the same restaurant, go to their work and I think for a lot of people it's hard because oh, maybe it's easy, I don't know. Live like nothing could happen."[22]

The *aspirations-capabilities model of migration* provides a tool to compare the White Russians with the Russian

migrants to Georgia. The White Russians were predominantly made up of former members of the aristocracy and middle-class professionals, with the second type as similar to the middle-class affluence of many of the recent Russian migrants to Georgia. Both groups had a similar capability to migrate and reestablish themselves in a new environment. Both groups had similar aspirations in migrating: While neither were seeking the type of adventure that de Haas associates with intrinsic aspirations, they both considered residing in Russia intolerable due to the actions of the regime (2021). Yet as the White Russians in many cases actively participated in the Russian Civil War, the likelihood of facing outright political persecution was much higher than for most of the Russians who fled after the onset of the war in Ukraine. The White Russians more closely approximate what de Haas calls "distress migrants," while the recent Russian migrants have aspects of both distress migrants and free migrants, who migrate to maintain their lifestyle in a new environment (2021, 27).

Conclusion

This paper has attempted to answer the questions of why Russians chose to migrate to Georgia after the onset of the Russo-Ukrainian war, and what their lives have been like abroad. Building on the findings of interviews conducted in Georgia, the paper uses the *aspirations-capabilities* model of migration to argue that the middle-class level of affluence of many of the Russian migrants provided the capability to leave their country. The perceived inability to continue living in a country actively invading its neighbor, and the potential to be conscripted into fighting in a war they believed to be unjust, provided the *intrinsic* and *instrumental aspirations* to migrate and introduced the distinction between *positive* and *negative intrinsic aspirations*. The paper has also built upon historical comparisons described by Prashizky (2024) by arguing that there are important parallels between the current Russian migrants and the White Russians, although the latter had a more defined fear of political persecution due to their participation in the civil war of 1917–1921.

The future of Russian migrants in Georgia is uncertain. Further research is needed to see how the presence of Russians is shaping the political climate within Georgia. The passage of the *Transparency of Foreign Influence* law in May 2024 may complicate the ability for Russian NGOs in Tbilisi to function. Research should consider the impact of the *Transparency* law on Russian NGOs and Russian civil society in Tbilisi in general.

Recent efforts by the Georgian government to stabilize relations with Russia might only heighten the vulnerability of the Russian migrants. Migrants in Georgia who are seen unfavorably by the Russian government often get singled out when leaving and re-entering Georgia to renew their visas. Some Russians who are active in the diaspora community have even avoided renewing their visas out of fear of getting denied reentry at the border. The Russian migrants in Georgia must therefore navigate between a Georgian government looking to strengthen ties with Russia that may not support the Russian migrants residing in the country, and a Georgian society that often sees the presence of Russians as the first step towards the reoccupation of their country by their northern neighbor.

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Notes

1. Anonymous. Personal interview, June 28, 2022.
2. Anonymous. Personal interview. July 15, 2022.
3. Anonymous. Personal interview. July 9, 2022.
4. Anonymous. Personal interview, July 15, 2022.
5. Anonymous. Personal interview. June 30, 2022.
6. Anonymous. Personal interview. July 9, 2022.
7. Anonymous B. Personal interview. July 4, 2022.
8. Anonymous A. Personal interview. July 4, 2022.
9. Anonymous B. Personal interview. July 4, 2022.
10. Anonymous A. Personal interview. July 4, 2022.
11. Anonymous. Personal interview. July 9, 2022.
12. Anonymous B. Personal interview. July 4, 2022.
13. Anonymous. Personal interview. July 15, 2022.
14. Anonymous B. Personal interview. July 4, 2022.
15. Anonymous B. Personal interview. July 4, 2022.
16. Anonymous. Personal interview. July 9, 2022.
17. Anonymous A. Personal interview. July 4, 2022.
18. Anonymous. Personal interview. July 15, 2022.
19. Anonymous A. Personal interview. July 4, 2022.
20. Anonymous. Personal interview. July 1, 2022.
21. Anonymous B. Personal interview. July 4, 2022.
22. Anonymous. Personal interview. July 15, 2022.

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Appendix

Interview Summary and Methodology

Methodology. The primary data gathering method used in this project was the semi-structured interview of Russian migrants. The semi-structured interview method was selected because this format allows for respondents to elaborate in detail the reasons for the actions they engaged in. This project involves exploring the reasons why individuals chose to leave Russia in the aftermath of the onset of the Russo-Ukrainian war and what their lives are like in exile. Understanding their reasons for migrating and experiences abroad was best explored through a research method that allowed the researcher to ask follow-up questions based on the particular responses given to the interview questions.

The interviewees were selected through a variety of means. The first was by meeting people in public spaces, such as a cafe, restaurant, and/or bar that Russian migrants were known to frequent, and beginning a casual conversation. The main author would explain who he is and what he was doing in Georgian, namely, that he is a professor from the US studying Russians who migrated to Georgia. People were often very willing to share their story. If the person seemed interested in speaking further, he or she would be invited to a formal interview at a quieter and more discrete location, which was usually a cafe or restaurant. He or she would be asked a series of questions (see the list of questions asked below), and new questions would be asked based on their particular responses and as new information arose. Upon concluding the interview, the interviewee would be asked for suggestions as to whom else might be interested in speaking.

The other way interviewees were recruited was by contacting Russian NGOs that had begun operations in Georgia. These organizations were sometimes NGOs that had originally formed in Russia and then moved after the war began, while in other cases the NGO was created anew by migrants after moving to Georgia. For some organizations, interviews were sought by using a general organization-related address, while for others contact information for specific individuals at the organization was already available. In this latter category, the authors were usually directed to interview these people by other contacts at the organization, or had received their contact information from another colleague in Georgia.

Table 1A summarizes the interviews conducted in Georgia between 2022 and 2024. The interviews typically lasted an

hour, and in most cases were recorded. The majority of the interviews were conducted face-to-face. Only two interviews were conducted via Zoom. In one instance, questions were sent and received via email as the individual's ability to speak in English was limited. In another instance, the head of an NGO who was traveling at the time was interviewed over Zoom.

The interviews were conducted in English. This did mean that in one case, an individual declined to be interviewed as he was not comfortable in speaking English, and he suggested interviewing another individual instead. Similarly, as mentioned, one individual supplied written responses instead of conducting an interview. Otherwise, the individuals interviewed were able to participate in English in varying levels of proficiency. The interview questions were shared in advance so that people would have a sense of what would be asked in the interview.

Table 1A describes basic information, while maintaining anonymity, of the interviewees. A total of 21 people were interviewed in 16 interview sessions. One interview included a couple, a male and a female, while another interview session took the form of a focus group where a group of 5 NGO volunteers were interviewed. Otherwise, all sessions were one-on-one conversations. 8 of the interviews included migrants, meaning individuals who were living and working (or looking for work) in Tbilisi. The other eight interviews included either individuals who started or were the directors of Russian NGOs in Tbilisi ("NGO organizer"), or individuals who were working/volunteering for a Russian NGO ("NGO volunteer").

Questions About Migration to Georgia

1. Questions for Russian Migrants.
   Why did you choose to leave Russia?
   What is your opinion of the Ukraine-Russian war?
   Why did Russia invade Ukraine?

Table 1A. Summary table of interviews conducted in Georgia, 2022–2024

Interviewee	Date	Gender
Migrant	24 June 2022	Male
Migrant	30 June 2022	Male
NGO organizer	4 July 2022	Male
Migrant	4 July 2022	Female
Migrants	9 July 2022	Male and female
Migrant	13 July 2022	Female
NGO volunteer	15 July 2022	Female
Migrant	1 June 2023	Male
Migrant	8 June 2023	Male
NGO organizer	20 June 2023	Female
NGO volunteer	27 June 2023	Male
NGO volunteers	28 June 2023	Focus group of 3 females and 2 males
NGO volunteer	30 June 2023	Male
Migrant	July 23 2023	Male
NGO organizer	July 18 2023	Male
NGO volunteer	13 May 2024	Female

   What does your family/your friends at home think about your decision?
   Under what conditions would you return to Russia?
   Why did you choose to settle in Georgia?
   What do you do for a living?
   What sort of reception have you received here?
   Do you plan to stay here as long as you can?
   Are Georgians welcoming?
   What do you think about the Georgian government?
   Is the Georgian government pro-Russia?
   Have you participated in any protests here? What were you protesting?